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The Girl Who Can and Other Stories

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THE GIRL WHO CAN AND OTHER STORIES (BOOK REVIEW)

Ama Ata Aidoo. *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*. Legon, Accra, Ghana. Sub-Saharan (African Books Collective, distr.). 1999 (Copyright 1997). 146 pages. £5.95/\$9.95. ISBN 9988-550-11-1.

Writing in several genres -- drama, the novel, poetry, the short story -- Ama Ata Aidoo, Ghana's leading female writer, has secured a place for herself in the Ghanaian literary canon. Hers is a voice to be reckoned with, not only as a modern African creative writer but also as an African female/feminist writer. Indeed, her voice, like that of fellow Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah, could be described as the voice of conscience and protest, exposing the social ills of postindependence Ghanaian society, especially in its treatment of women. As she has done in her many essays, she chronicles women's struggles for intellectual, educational, professional independence and recognition in her creative works.

Aptly titled and written in a "women who could and did" fashion, her second book of short fiction, *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*, contains eleven short stories ranging from the anecdotal to the political and the philosophical. Seven of these had been previously published in magazines and journals between 1974 and 1995. The stories, mostly ruminations on various subjects -- the merging of Old World wisdom with the modern, the value of tradition, woman-to-woman dynamics, frustrated and realized dreams -- examine, generally, the issues of womanhood and being a woman in a modern, male-dominated, postindependence African world. The picture certainly is neither pretty nor healthy, because, ironically, modernization has not truly liberated women, their intellectual capacity, educational ability, and professional skills notwithstanding.

Instead, as in "Lice," modern woman-being is shrouded in unfulfilledness, as in the story of a modern wife-mother-professional who must expend her fizzled energy in contemplating suicide while delousing her daughter and herself. Or perhaps modernization has some explaining to do about woman-to-woman dynamics in "Payments," where the issue of economic disparity empowers women of means to ill-treat their less fortunate sisters. Then there is the heartwarming tribute to the three women who dared to join the Ghana Air Force, breaking barriers women had never thought of assailing.

The Girl Who Can consists of credible stories about actual characters and everyday living. Its language is vivid, lively, conversational, particularly in Aidoo's use of anecdotes to contextualize some of the stories about current national and international events. The mixture of culture-specific referents and expressions authenticates the voices of the characters, especially in stories like "Payments," in which a fishmonger manages a one-person "dialogue" with her fellow fishmongers. Likewise memorable is the humor in the ludicrousness of an entire town's populace, setting about "the business of Europeanizing themselves with panache" with the men wearing "three-piece woolen suits, complete with top hats" and the women wearing long evening gowns, hats, stockings, and gloves in eighty-eight-degree sun. Equally, humor is not lost in the serious yet ludicrous christianizing of Kojo, who, in "Male-ing Names in the Sun," was forcibly baptized as George Kojo Shillingson at the whim of an officious, Europeanized local priest.

As some writers have confided, facility with the novel genre does not necessarily translate to facility with the short story. Aidoo is equally at home in both, successfully traversing the various genres, as evidenced by this her latest collection of short stories.

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By Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith, University of Nebraska, Omaha

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